287 died after abduction during Hasina era, says commission

DHAKA: A Bangladesh commission investigating disappearances during the rule of ousted prime minister Sheikh Hasina said Monday at least 287 people were assumed to have been killed.

The commission said some corpses were believed to have been dumped in rivers, including the Buriganga in the capital, Dhaka, or buried in mass graves.

The government-appointed commission, formed after a mass uprising in August 2024 toppled Hasina, said it had investigated 1,569 cases of abductions, with 287 of the victims presumed dead.

"We have identified several unmarked graves in several places where the bodies were presumably buried," Nur Khan Liton, a commission member, said.

"The commission has recommended that Bangladesh seek cooperation from forensic experts to identify the bodies and collect and preserve DNA samples from family members." In its final report, submitted to the government on Sunday, the commission said that security forces had acted under the command of Hasina and her top officials.

The report said many of those abducted had belonged to the country's largest Islamist party, Jamaat-e-Islami, or the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), both in opposition to Hasina.

In a separate investigation, police in December began exhuming a mass grave in Dhaka.—AFP

Syrian leader appears in public after shootout reports

BEIRUT: Syrian President Ahmed al Sharaa appeared in a video widely circulated on Monday using the country's new currency, after his interior ministry denied reports of a shooting incident at his palace.

For days, social media users have been circulating reports of gunfire on Dec 30 at the palace, which overlooks the capital.

Earlier on Monday, Syrian authorities denied Sharaa had been targeted in any security incident, while two sources said a "shooting took place" in Damascus's presidential palace last week.

In a video circulated online, Sharaa was shown buying items from a shop in Damascus using the new Syrian currency, which went into circulation on Jan 1.

An interior ministry spokesman said "reports claiming a security incident targeted" Sharaa or other senior figures were "totally baseless".

"We categorically affirm that these claims are entirely false," he said.

A diplomat from a country that supports Syria's new authorities said "a shooting took place at the presidential palace on the evening of Dec 30".

According to another source, the shooting lasted "around 12 minutes" and left several wounded. The souce, however, added that the incident was caused by "an internal dispute" between individuals at the palace and did not target Sharaa.

The Syrian leader, who appears sporadically, had not been seen in public since he unveiled the country's new currency last Monday.—AFP

COLOGNE (Germany): Sophie Adenot (left), an astronaut of the European Space Agency, poses for a photo with Nasa astronauts Jessica Meir and Jack Hathaway during a media event in the run-up to their trip to the International Space Station.—Reuters

Pro-junta party wins first phase of Myanmar election

Overall results are due after the third and final phase scheduled for Jan 25

YANGON: Myanmar's dominant pro-military party won the first phase of junta-run elections, the last released official results showed on Monday, with the USDP taking nearly 90 per cent of lower house seats.

The military staged a 2021 coup that ousted the democratic government of Aung San Suu Kyi, but is overseeing a month-long phased election it pledges will return power to the people.

Western diplomats and democracy advocates dismiss the poll as a ploy to rebrand military rule, citing Suu Kyi's jailing, her party's dissolution, a crackdown on dissenters and a ballot stacked with military allies.

The pro-military Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP) won 89 of 102 lower house seats included in the first phase, according to a tally of official results released from Friday to Monday.

The USDP win equates to more than 87pc of lower house seats included in the first phase of voting on December 28 — the remainder mostly won by a smattering of parties representing ethnic minorities.

Many analysts and democracy watchdogs describe the USDP as a proxy of the military, citing the large numbers of retired officers serving in senior positions.

Overall results are due after the vote's third and final phase scheduled for January 25.

Regardless of the vote, a quarter of lower house seats and key cabinet positions will be reserved for members of the armed forces under the terms of the country's military-drafted constitution.

The USDP was trounced by Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy (NLD) party in the last elections in 2020 before the military overturned the vote, alleging widespread fraud and staging a coup.

Suu Kyi, 80, remains jailed incommunicado and the NLD is not appearing on ballots.

The military coup sparked a civil war as pro-democracy protesters formed guerrilla units to fight alongside ethnic minority armed groups which have long resisted central rule.

Rebel factions have pledged to block the vote from the enclaves they control, and the junta has admitted the vote cannot be held nationwide, but is waging offensives in a bid to claw back ground.

The election panel has not revealed the total number of constituencies voting in the first phase, opting instead to release partial results on a constituency-by-constituency basis.

On Wednesday, the junta said 52pc of voters, or more than half of those eligible, had cast ballots in the first phase. That fell short of turnout of about 70pc in general elections in 2020 and 2015, however, according to the US-based nonprofit International Foundation for Electoral Systems.

Two more rounds of voting set for January 11 and January 25 will cover 265 of Myanmar's 330 townships, in some of which the junta does not have complete control.

Analysts say the junta's bid to set up a stable government in the midst of war is fraught with risk, and broad foreign recognition is also unlikely for any military-controlled administration with a civilian veneer.—Agencies

Kim readying N. Korean forces for 'nuclear war'

SEOUL: North Korean leader Kim Jong Un oversaw the firing of "cutting-edge" hypersonic missiles to ready Pyongyang's nuclear forces for war, state media reported Monday, saying "geopolitical crisis" made the test even more urgent in a clear nod to this weekend's US attack on Venezuela.

Seoul and Tokyo said Sunday they had detected the launch from near Pyongyang of two ballistic missiles — the country's first test of the year, just hours before South Korean leader Lee Jae Myung headed to Beijing for a summit.

Lee has said he hopes to use his visit to leverage China's influence over North Korea to improve Seoul's relations with Pyongyang.

On Monday, the *Korean Central News Agency* (*KCNA*) quoted Kim as saying the test showed "the readiness of the DPRK's nuclear forces", referring to North Korea by its official name.

"Important achievements have been recently made in putting our nuclear forces on a practical basis and preparing them for an actual war," Kim was quoted as saying by *KCNA*.

Pyongyang's activity, he said, was "aimed at gradually putting the nuclear war deterrent on a highly developed basis".

Photos shared by state media showed Kim puffing on a cigarette, accompanied by top officials as a missile soars into the early morning sky.—AFP

Ukraine's security chief ousted amid shake-up

KYIV: Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky on Monday ousted the country's security service chief iin the latest change to Kyiv's top intelligence positions, almost four years into the Russian invasion.

Zelensky and Vasyl Maliuk, a popular military leader who won praise for overseeing ambitious operations against Russian forces, said that Maliuk was stepping down as head of the Security Service of Ukraine (SBU).

Zelensky said on social media he had met Maliuk and thanked him for his service, posting a photo of the two men shaking hands.

Maliuk said he was "stepping down" but would remain "within the SBU system to carry out world-class asymmetric special operations that will continue to inflict maximum damage on the enemy." Amid reports that Maliuk was on the brink of being removed, several top military figures had rallied behind him with statements of support over the weekend.

Ukraine's SBU has claimed numerous bold attacks on Russia since Moscow invaded in 2022.

They include the 2024 killing in Moscow of a head of the Russian army's chemical weapons division and repeated attacks on the Crimean Bridge.

In June 2025, the SBU carried out one of the most ambitious attacks by either side in the entire war — dubbed Operation Spiderweb — when drones smuggled into Russia launched simultaneous attacks on Russian nuclear-capable bombers and airfields deep behind the front line.—AFP

China's birth-rate push sputters as couples opt to stay child-free

BEIJING: Twenty-five-year-old Grace and her husband are set on staying child-free, resisting pressure from their parents and society to produce offspring, even as China strives to boost its flagging birth rate.

A decade since China scrapped its stringent one-child policy and implemented a two-child policy in January 2016, the nation is dealing with a looming demographic crisis.

The country's population has shrunk for three straight years, with the United Nations predicting it could fall from 1.4 billion today to 633 million by 2100.

There were just 9.54 million births in China in 2024 — half the number than in 2016 — and concerns about the shrinking and ageing population have been growing as couples choose to buck traditional Chinese norms.

More young people like Grace, who refers to herself and her husband as DINKs — or "dual income no kids" — have either sworn against having children at all or are putting it off for the next few years.

These couples' reasons run the gamut from high child-rearing costs to career concerns.

Grace, who asked to be identified by her English name over fears of repercussions, said she needed to have a decent income and "some savings" before starting a family.

Without these conditions, "I wouldn't even consider having kids", the content creator added.

The term "DINK" has gone viral on Chinese social media, including Xiaohongshu, where its hashtag has received more than 731 million views, sparking differing views on the subject.

"If I were to widely publicise the fact that I'm a DINK and talk about how comfortable my life is, there would definitely be many people who wouldn't be happy about it," Grace said.

Changing attitudes

Chinese authorities have rolled out pro-natalist incentives after ending their one-child policy — which had been in place for more than three decades to address poverty and overpopulation.

Top leaders have pledged more childcare relief, including subsidies to parents to the tune of $500 per year for every child under the age of three, state media reported in July.

Beijing also slapped a value-added tax on condoms and other contraceptives in January.

But experts say China, which was overtaken by India as the world's most populous nation in 2023, still faces significant hurdles in boosting its birth rate.

"The number of people choosing not to marry or not to have children is increasing, and fertility intentions among the younger generation are weak," He Yafu, an independent Chinese demographer, said.

Cultural constraints have limited the long-term effectiveness of China's pronatalist measures, said Pan Wang, an associate professor at Australia's University of New South Wales.

"The one-child policy fundamentally reshaped family norms and also people's lifestyles, because many people, especially the one-child generation, were used to and often prefer smaller family sizes," Wang said.—AFP

NEWSMAKERS

FENTALE (Ethiopia): Men dressed in traditional costumes attend the naming ceremony of Abbaa Gadaaa, a new tribal leader.—Reuters

SANTA MONICA (United States): Jimmy Kimmel poses with the Best Talk Show award during the 31st Annual Critics Choice Awards.—Reuters

BERLIN: A Giant Panda receives an unsold leftover Christmas tree at a zoo.—Reuters

KIYOSHI Kimura poses with the 243-kilogram bluefin tuna.—Reuters

'Tuna king' pays record $3.2m for bluefin at Tokyo auction

TOKYO: A Japanese sushi entrepreneur paid a record $3.2 million for a giant bluefin tuna Monday at an annual prestigious new year auction in Tokyo's main fish market, smashing the previous all-time high.

Dave Gershman at the Pew Charitable Trusts' international fisheries team used news of the auction to highlight that stocks of Pacific bluefin tuna were improving after being "near collapse".

Self-styled "Tuna King" Kiyoshi Kimura's sushi restaurant chain paid the top price for the 243-kilogram (536-pound) fish that was caught off Japan's northern coast.

"I'd thought we would be able to buy a little cheaper, but the price soared before you knew it," Kimura said after the predawn auction at Tokyo's main fish market.

"I was surprised at the price...I hope that by eating auspicious tuna, as many people as possible will feel energised," he told reporters.

The 510.3 million yen price at the new year's auction was the highest since comparable data started being collected in 1999.

The previous high was 333.6 million yen for a 278 kilogram bluefin in 2019, after the fish market moved from its traditional Tsukiji area in central Tokyo to a more modern facility.

The top bidder last year paid 207 million yen for a 276-kilogram bluefin.

Shortly after this year's auction, the tuna was butchered and turned into sushi, selling for around 500 yen ($3) per roll.

"I feel like I've begun the year in a good way after eating something so auspicious as the year starts," 19-year-old Minami Sugiyama said from a table in one of Kimura's restaurants in Tsukiji.

Fellow customer Kiyoshi Nishimura agreed.—AFP

PARIS: A woman walks her dog in a snow-covered area in front of the Eiffel Tower, as snow and cold temperatures hit a large part of France over the weekend.—Reuters

SEOUL: A protester wearing a mask of President Donald Trump performs during a demonstration in front of the US embassy condemning the attack on Venezuela.—AFP